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ABSTRACT

A striving for something beyond ourselves is one way of defining spirituality, and, although spiritual and religious motives have traditionally impelled students to learn to read, the intersection of literacy and spirituality has gone largely unrecognized by scholars. Six women were interviewed about how they use literacy in their spiritual lives. All were members of Al Anon, aged 35-55, ranged from GED (Graduate Equivalency Degree) to masters student. Al-Anon, patterned after Alcoholics Anonymous, utilizes the "Twelve" Steps and is biased toward literacy. The women in the study wrote many different kinds of documents which were studied, including fourth steps, journals, "Dear God" letters, poems, stories, etc. Two of the subjects, Jennifer and Tommie, represent all of these genres and display a rich complexity of voice. Extensive quotes from their individual writings document their separate experiences. Three stages in their similar spiritual journeys can be outlined as follows: (1) "The healing came," associated with the "fearless moral inventory" of the fourth step. (2) "I had to let go of it being perfect, and then it became perfect," referring to the release of expectations; and (3) "We can't carry our message if we don't have our own language," which entails discovering the true power of each individual's own words. This last stage of attaining a personal language is similar to Bell Hooks's notion of "coming to voice." For both, the intersection of literacy and spirituality involves empowerment. (HB)

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Spiritual Sites of Composing

Composing (as) Power

At this conference in 1988, Ann Berthoff fundmentally altered my view of reality. As she asked a question in a session, she said that Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed results as much from his Catholicism as from his Marxism. Suddenly, I thought: Yes. That's it. Economic or political analyses don't account for the success of Freire's method; the explanation is, rather, that Freire taps into that striving, in his students, teachers, and readers, for something beyond ourselves. Precisely the definition of spirituality--the striving for a connection with God, the universe, the life-force, humankind, one's own higher "self."

Later that same year I read Jim Moffett's Storm in the Mountains, an extended analysis of a schoolbook censorship case. Here Moffett argues that one reason that public education sometimes alienates rather than enlightens is that it fails to take seriously the spiritual and religious values of students and parents. He is right. As scholars and teachers in America, we have been carefully trained not only to separate religion from civic life but also to dismiss the spiritual--at least in part because it cannot be quantified or forced to follow the "rational" laws of logic.

What makes this dismissal so apparent in academic discussions of literacy is that, according to historical studies like those by Jack Goody or the Resnicks, spiritual and religious motives have traditionally impelled human beings to literacy and, in America, to

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statutes that require it. Even though adult literacy workers all over the country testify to their students' religious motives for learning to read, only a few ethnographic studies, most notably Heath's in "Protean Shapes" and Ways with Words, take seriously any contemporary interaction of religion or spirituality with literacy. Despite Heath's work and more recent projects by researchers like Fishman, Walters, or Moss, it is nonetheless still fair to say that the intersection of literacy and sprituality has gone largely unrecognized in our discipline.

After what I call my Berthoff-Moffett epiphany, I decided to investigate. In the summer 1990 I interviewed 6 women about how they use literacy in their spiritual lives. These women range in age from mid-thirties to mid-fifties. Their education is from GED to masters student. All six of these women know each other. All six are members of Al-Anon.

Some of you whose lives have been affected, as mine has been, by someone else's drinking may be familiar with this organization. Patterned after Alcoholics Anonymous and formally organized in the early 1950's, Al-Anon is, in its own words, "a fellowship of relatives and friends of alcoholics who share their experience, strength, and hope in order to solve their common problems....The Al-Anon program is based on the Twelve Steps (adapted from Alcoholics Anonymous) which we try, little by little, one day at a time, to apply to our own lives" (41). For those of you know about 12 Step programs only from Time and Newsweek, I have copies of the 12 Steps.

The literate bias of Al-Anon is apparent to even a casual observer. Members are exhorted to "read the literature." Meetings begin with various members reading aloud the Suggested Welcome, the Steps, the Traditions, and the day's page in a book entitled One Day at a Time in Al-Anon. Discussion often consists of sharing interpretations of a text. The Fourth Step--"Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves"--is almost universally taken to mean a written inventory; the Eighth Step is usually understood as a written list. If you know the history of AA, the model for Al-Anon, this emphasis on reading and writing will not be surprising. AA's founders were highly literate and highly educated, an Akron physician and a New York stockbroker.

Because reading and writing are significant activities in the Al-Anon program, because Al-Anon claims that its program is inherently spiritual, and because my six informants had in 1990 been involved in Al-Anon from three to seven years, I expected them to be able to talk about their spirituality and their reading and writing in the same breath. They did not let me down. I have 17 hours of tape from the 1990 interviews.

My informants write many different kinds of things. As in all genre study, if you push too hard, the lines blur and the distinctions break down. With that qualification in mind, I have categorized these women's writings as 4th Steps, journals, "God can" notes, "Dear God" letters, letters (to be mailed or not), poems, short stories, essays for publication, and school papers. Because of time, I'm going to focus today on the writing of only two of my informants, Jennifer and Tommie; between them, they write or have

written all the genres I have identified, though, as you will see, they don't necessarily share my terminology. I want you to hear Jennie's and Tommie's voices, but at the same time I want to make the data accessible to you as a listening audience. So at the risk of oversimplifying the rich complexity of these women's perceptions, I have organized this presentation around what seems to me to be three stages in the journey. Each stage is perhaps best summarized by a sentence from Tommie: First, "The healing came." Second, "I had to let go of it being perfect, and then it became perfect." And third, "We can't carry our message if we don't have our own language."

When I interviewed Jennifer in 1990 she was 36 years old, had been divorced for two years, had no children, and was mid-way through a masters in counseling. Tommie was 41 years old, married to her second husband, the mother of three children, two of them teenaged boys. Tommie dropped out of high school in 11th grade to get married; in 1984 she earned her GED.

"The healing came" for both Jen and Tommie with the 4th Step, "the fearless moral inventory." Central to the spiritual lives of both, this step seems to mark the beginning of the end of the personal confusion that had brought each of them to Al-Anon. This is what Tommie says about the 4th Step: "I was in such pain. But I couldn't write the Blueprint." The Blueprint for Progress is a workbook published by Al-Anon designed to help a person look at his or her behaviors and values. She explains her trouble: "I kept writing the same answers to every question. When I focused on the gory details, I got into the completeness of it all. So I had to

throw all that away. My first 4th Step didn't have gory details. I decided: keep this simple. It didn't have to be everything, it only to be what I knew. I wrote about a page and a half. An enormous prayer: God, here are the things I don't like about myself. In that 4th Step was stuff I was afraid to say to anyone. I kept it for a year, finally burned it. The healing came."

Jennie didn't care for the Blueprint, either, but unlike Tommie, who invented her own form, Jennie persevered. This is how Jennie tells it: "The first thing I wrote after getting into the program was connected with my 4th Step. I used the Blueprint. I felt like I was doing an assignment for English class. I could not see any connection between what I was doing and what it was supposed to result in. But it was helpful to my sponsor." A sponsor is a combination confidant and spiritual guide. Jennie continues, "I just gave her the booklet to read. We talked about my answers as she read."

Even though Jennie sees value in that first 4th Step, she no longer uses this method, having found another way to write the three or four 4th Steps she has completed in her 7 years in the program. She explains, "I do a 4th Step whenever I get stuck, when something permeates my life and I need to get it on paper."

In the next stage it becomes important to let go of expectations of how things ought to be; in Tommie's words, "I had to let go of it being perfect, and then it became perfect." In this stage, each woman used various literate forms to come to her own solutions. In this stage, the main genre appears to be the journal. Both Jennie and Tommie are journal-writers, though neither writes

every day or follows a strict form. Again, as with the 4th Step, Jennie and Tommie's experiences with journals are different. Tommie traces the evolution of her journal: "I started writing, keeping a journal in October of 83. I came into the program in March of 84. I started writing because people couldn't listen to me any more. I wrote as release and analysis. I started writing in a notebook where I also had recipes and wrote kids' notes. Then I started writing Dear God Letters and prose."

The Dear God Letters began, she says, after she read The Color Purple. As teachers of literature, you and I would use the term poetry for the pieces Tommie calls prose. Read aloud, they sound like poetry. On the page, they look like poetry. But, according to Tommie, "Prose doesn't rhyme. It has meter, but it doesn't rhyme. Poetry rhymes."

For Tommie, the journal is very much a means of claiming ownership of her life: "I write the journal for me," she says. "It's not an assignment." Tommie believes that sharing her journal is a way of sharing her spiritual growth. She explains: "I tell other people in the program that part of my recovery is keeping a journal. I write for me, but when I show it to you, it helps you. I show my journal to people I'm talking to. Even with some Dear God letters not being finished. I had to let go of it being perfect, and then it became perfect. If I'd a done it the way I thought you had to do it, I'd a never done it."

Jennifer does not use the term journal for writings that seem to function for her in same way that the journal does for Tommie. In fact, Jen says with certainty, "I don't keep a journal or

diaries, but I have. Once when my sponsor went out of town. Once when my husband was in treatment. It was a way of recording what went on." Nonetheless Jennie talks about the writing she does in a steno pad. Here she writes letters she does not intend to mail, records dreams, defines words, and freewrites about issues in her life in order to attain clarity or find a connection between the issue she is working on and other experiences in her life.

Just as Tommie uses the Dear God letters in her journal as a way to attain emotional detachment from the problems in her life, so Jennie uses her God Can notes. In her kitchen, Jen keeps a can (Folger's coffee, I think) that has pasted on it a label declaring "I Can't. God Can." Jennie explains how this works: "I can't just visualize putting somebody or some problem in God's hands; that doesn't work for me. I condense it into a few words, on an inch- or a 2-inch piece of paper, 1/2 inch wide. When I put it in the God Can, I can let go."

In this middle stage, both Jen and Tommie devise various literate strategies for coming to terms with their experiences and for letting go not only of other people's rules but also of their own private struggles. Using various written forms--prose, Dear God letters, journals, God can notes--these women are, Robert Brooke would say, negotiatiating their own identities. And thus they reach the third stage: "We can't carry our message if we don't have our own language."

Despite all her writing, Jennie did not in 1990 think of herself as a writer. She told me, "I've not gotten back into writing. I've had writer's block for years. I used to write poetry.

I'm hoping I'll get that back. I remember writing as a teenager. I liked writing then."

When I interviewed Jennie, most of what she was writing was for her classes. Returning to graduate school after an hiatus of 10 years probably accounts at least partially for the initial difficulty Jennie reported in writing her school papers. Half way through her masters program her writing was becoming easier and better, because she now was able to claim authorship of school assignments in a way she had not done previously. Here is how Jen explains it: "There's a different part of me that produces now. It's coming out now like I have to write. Like this morning, I had to do this reaction paper on Reality Therapy. The assignment was to read the book and then tell what you like and don't like. But this other part of me says, Wait a minute, this is what you believe. What I believe is not normally what I'd put in a class paper. There's something in me different that's putting together what I want to say. Writing it, ideas come from some place else, and it's not what I intended to write at first. What I ended up with was more integrated and at a higher level intellectually. I need to relax and let that come out."

So for Jennie, then, even her academic writing has a spiritual aspect--in her words, "something that comes from somewhere within me. Like last night, just all of a sudden came the words 'I believe' and I wrote on a deposit slip so that I could use this idea in my paper this morning. It feels like it's--in me--but from somewhere other than my thinking."

In discovering this something that comes from somewhere other than her thinking, Jennie is learning to trust the power of her own words, a power that is both generative and freeing. Tommie also believes in the power of language. In fact, Tommie believes deeply in the connection between the spiritual and language. She says, "In [Steps] Six and Seven, you get your own language. See, we can't carry our message," Tommie says, "if we don't have our own language." To illustrate, Tommie tells of a woman who in a meeting described herself as a parrot who could only repeat what everyone else had told her to say. Celebrating this other woman's transformation, Tommie explains, "She has come to her own language," a phrase strikingly similar to Bell Hooks' much-quoted "coming to voice." In Talking Back Hooks defines "coming to voice" as "moving from silence into speech," which she identifies as a "revolutionary gesture ... especially relevant for women who are speaking and writing for the first time ... a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject" (12).

What Bell Hooks is talking about and what Tommie and Jen both talk about and illustrate is empowerment. They are talking about making meaning out of human experience, about using language and writing to name and claim their lives. Perhaps it is possible to theorize, then, that at the intersection of literacy and spirituality exist both meaning and power. At this conference when we have discussed writing and power, we have meant intellectual, economic, social, or political power. Perhaps it is time for us to include as well the spiritual.